

1899

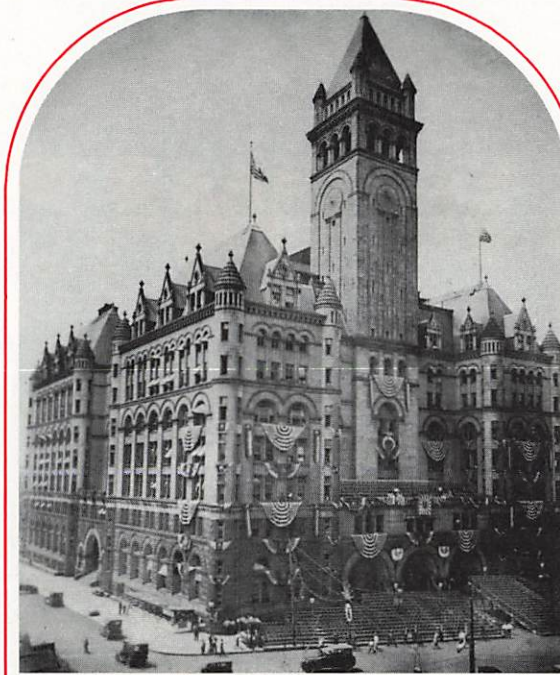
A Preservation Victory Saves Washington's OLD POST OFFICE

By WOLF VON ECKARDT Photographs by VOLKMAR WENTZEL NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER

THE OLD POST OFFICE building in Washington, D. C., ten floors of gray Maine granite topped by a 315-foot clock tower, looked, one critic said, like "a cross between a cathedral and a cotton mill."

It seemed to have been built under an unlucky star. In 1899, not long after the building was occupied, former Washington Postmaster James P. Willett plunged down an elevator shaft and departed this life. It became the "old" Post Office after just 15 years, replaced by a more efficient edifice. To citizens gazing up at its tower, the tallest structure in the capital save for the Washington Monument, the building was that "Old Tooth."

While accumulating grime beside Pennsylvania Avenue, the Old Tooth housed the nation's postmasters general until 1934, then the overflow of sundry federal agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation. As



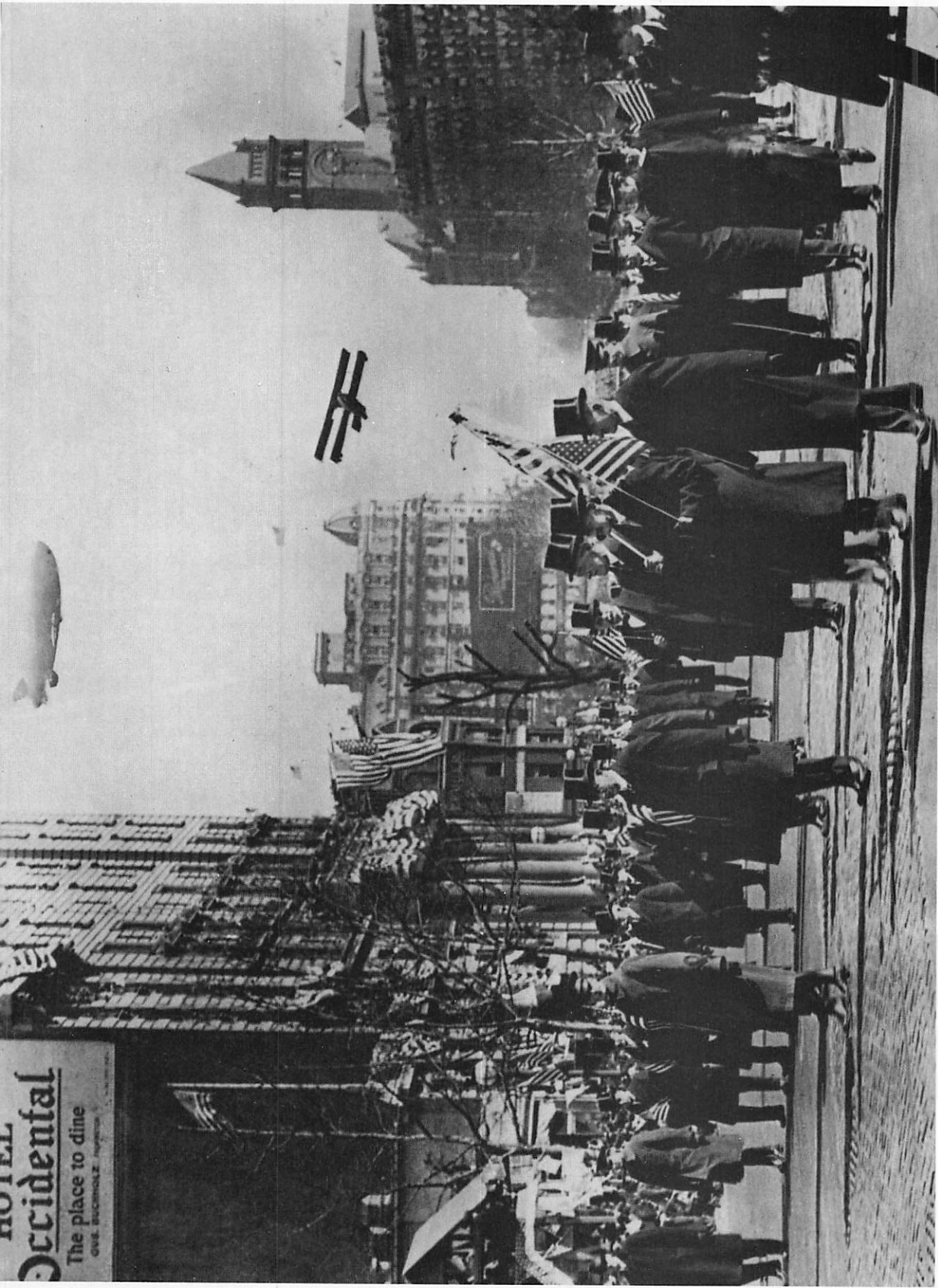
***Eyewitness to history**, the bulky fortress completed in 1899 to house the federal postal department has viewed Pennsylvania Avenue parades from inaugural to astronaut, suffragette to war vet. Flags draped its gray granite in June 1923 (left) for a national Shriners convention. Its clock tower looms behind President Woodrow Wilson (below, right of center), leading World War I soldiers on February 27, 1919, in a welcome home that included biplanes and a blimp.*

Outmoded and targeted for destruction in 1934, the Old Post Office miraculously survived and was recently renovated. Its best surprise is a soaring atrium (overleaf), here seen during rededication on April 19, 1983. Trusses, bottom, once held an interior skylight. Architects cut into the basement to create this multilevel space.

HOTEL
Occidental

The place to dine

ONE EICHENHOLZ PROPERTY



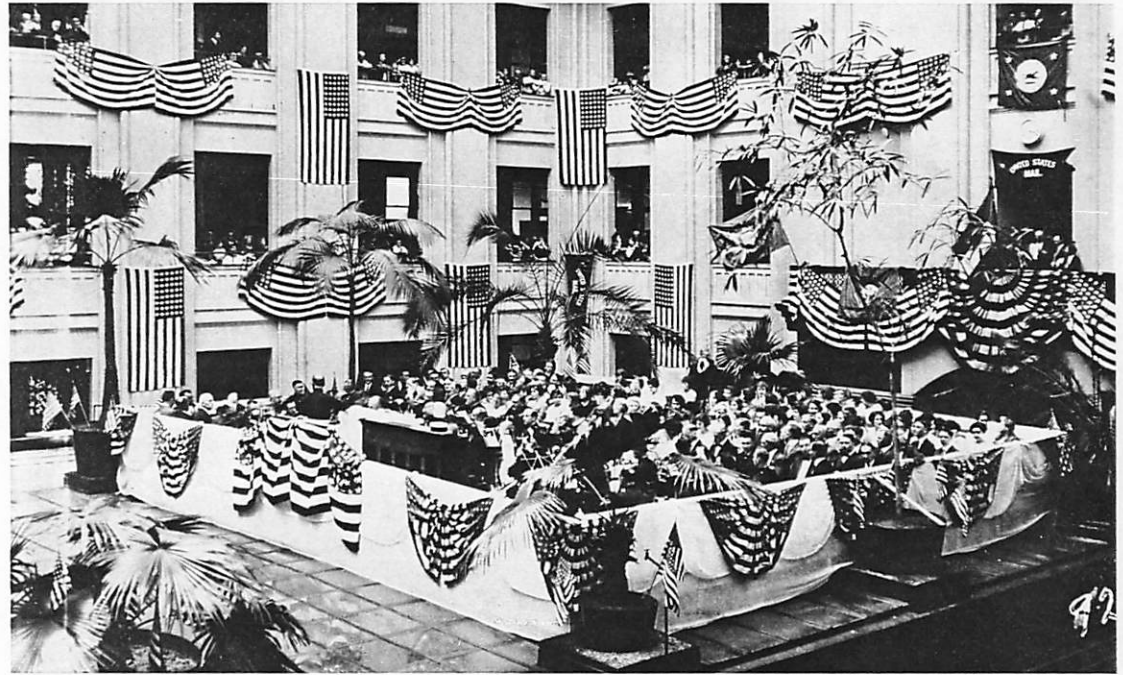
other architectural fashions bloomed along the "Avenue of the Presidents" (*above*), the Romanesque revival style of the Old Tooth drew contempt; for decades the building lay under the threat of demolition.

But Americans have been rediscovering their cities in recent years, and the Old Post Office bids to become a tower in the movement. Reprieved and renovated, upgraded from grimy derelict to community asset, the pioneering project will combine government quarters with shops, restaurants, entertainment, and just plain fun. Its salvation was due to a mannerly public revolt, decisively abetted by the late Nancy Hanks, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts under Presidents Nixon and Ford, and to 30 million dollars in federal funds.

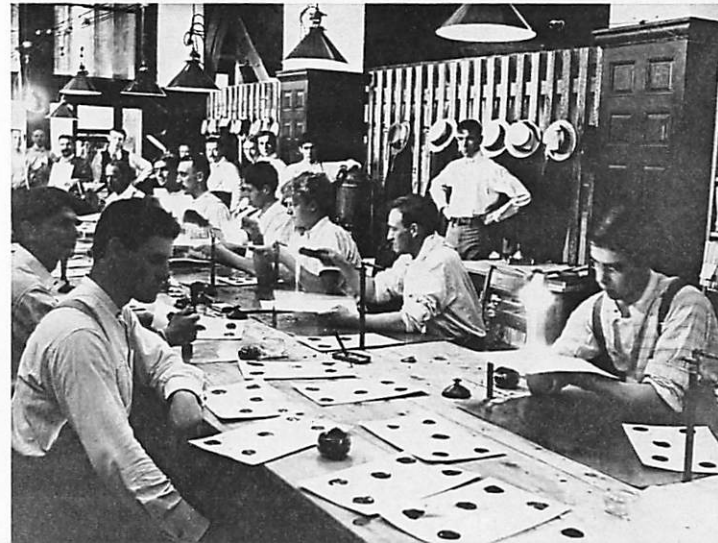
Seven floors of pleasant offices already house federal agencies devoted to the arts and humanities. The arched galleries of these upper floors look down on a magnificent cortile, or inner court, 99 feet wide and 184 feet long. The first-floor area, where mail was once sorted, now boasts restaurants that overlook a stage. Roundabout on three levels, 60,000 square feet of space has been leased for specialty food shops and boutiques that will cater to both office workers and capital visitors.

That is not all. In the tower, dramatically visible through the cortile's glass canopy, ten great bells will peal from time to time, providing, their donors hope, that occasional "blinding flash of inspiration which helps drive

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POSTAL SERVICE LIBRARY, WASHINGTON, D. C. (ABOVE); NATIONAL ARCHIVES



Promoting Flag Day, postal workers celebrate in the Wilson era by attending a concert, played from a stage atop the interior skylight. In 1949 Congress recognized growing observances of the June 14 salute by voting it national status.

In a dim corridor federal clerks (*left*) use wax to seal official envelopes. The building also served as city post office until 1914.

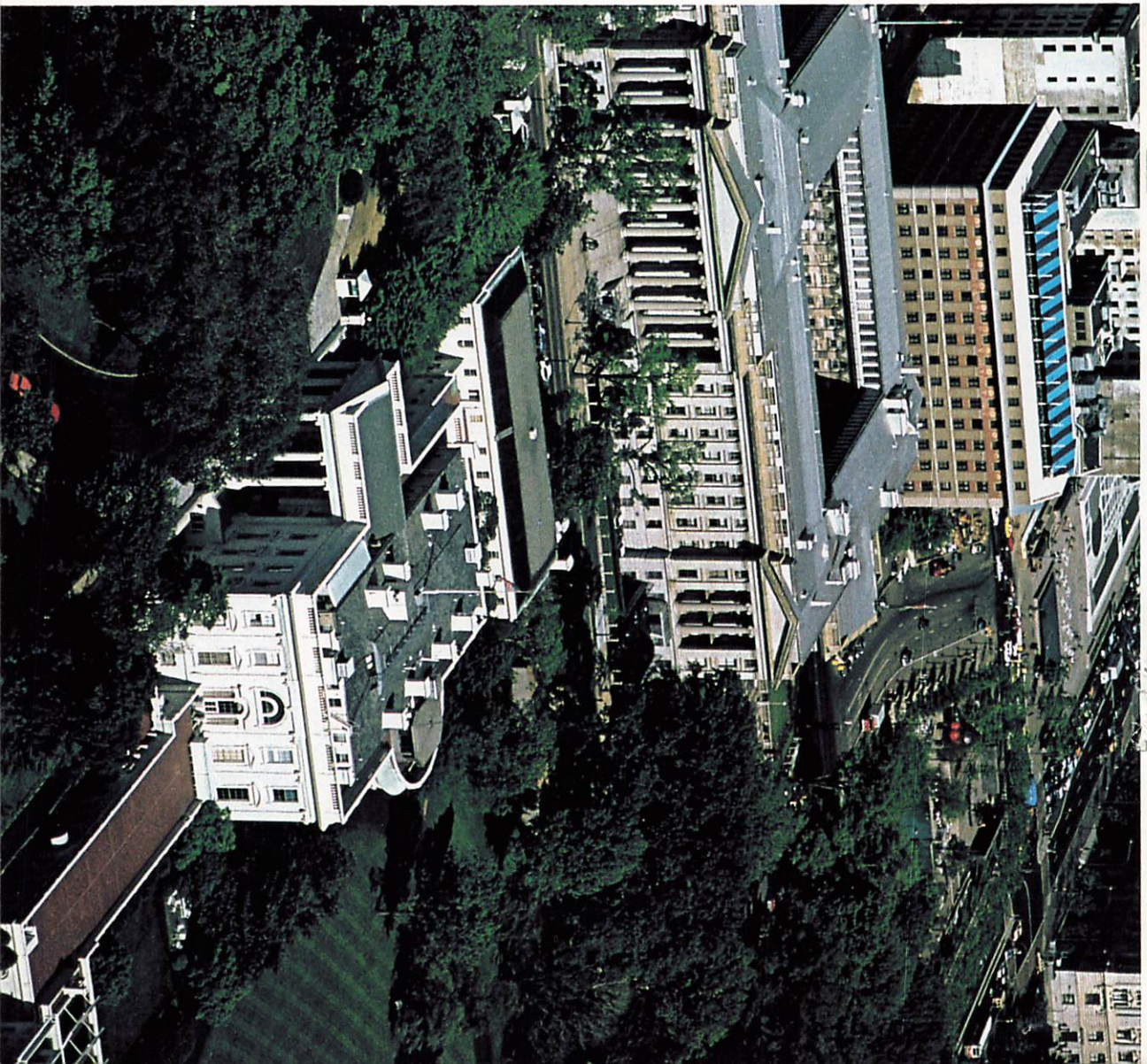
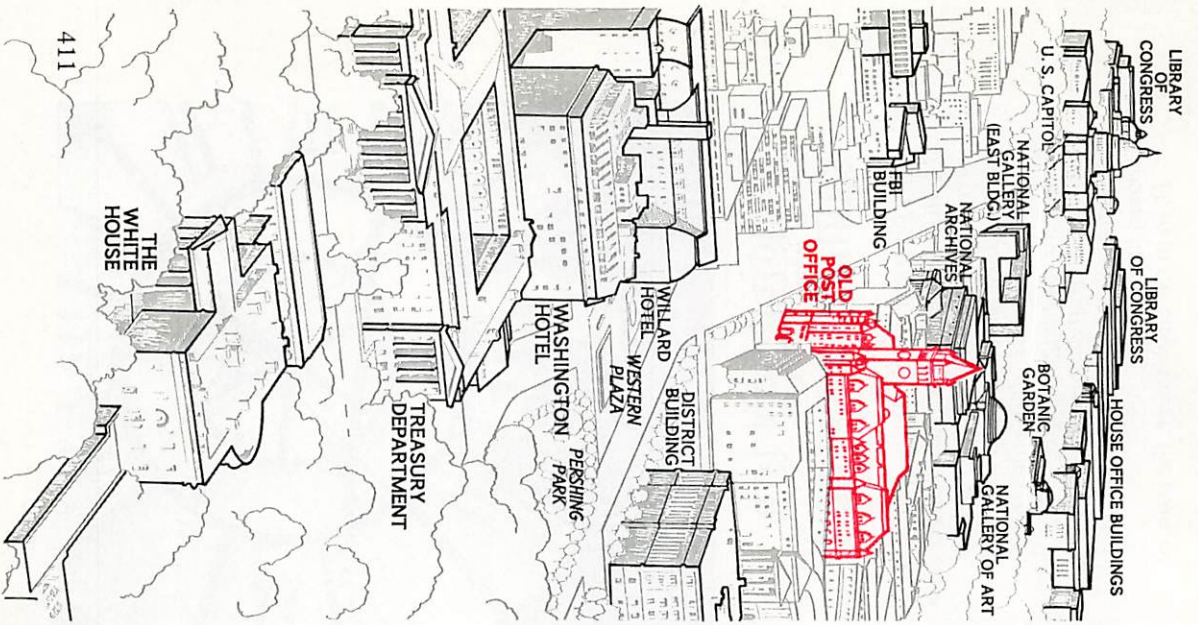
Diversity marks the nation's Main Street

PENNSYLVANIA Avenue—showcase of changing architectural fashion—harks back to noble beginnings. City planner Pierre Charles L'Enfant envisioned a broad avenue—at the time a swampy morass—to connect the Capitol on Jenkins Hill and the President's House on a ridge $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles west (**right, lower**). After the Treasury burned, its replacement in 1836, approved by President Andrew Jackson, followed the idea of placing executive departments around the President's home. The Treasury was not extended until after Jackson left office, contradicting a legend that he deliberately built it to block his view of the Congress he detested.

From the start the thoroughfare was vibrant with vendors, a central market, gambling halls, theaters, newspaper offices, taverns, and hotels.

As soon as the Post Office opened, its style—Richardsonian Romanesque—was in disrepute. By 1926 executive departments were being urged to build in the Federal Triangle in neoclassic style. In 1964 Pennsylvania Avenue planners intended to raze the Old Post Office, except for its freestanding tower. Also targeted was the Willard Hotel, to make way for a huge plaza. But by 1980 other planners were building Pershing Park—a terraced pool garden—and Western Plaza, which maps L'Enfant's design in stone while intruding on his avenue.





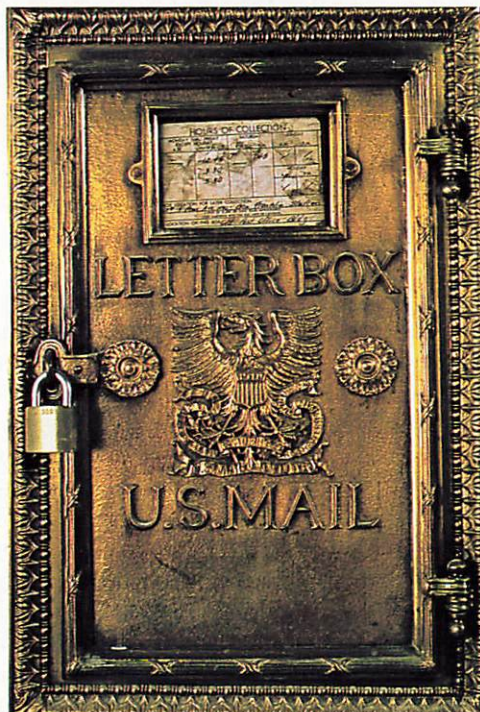


Bringing light to a stunning courtyard

AFTER RENOVATION began in 1978, the old metal roof came off and a glass skylight was reinstalled. The glorious atrium lined with balconied corridors, reminiscent of an Italian palazzo, came back into view (right). After 1934, when the postal department moved out, assorted government offices had been housed here.

High in the clock tower, the painted

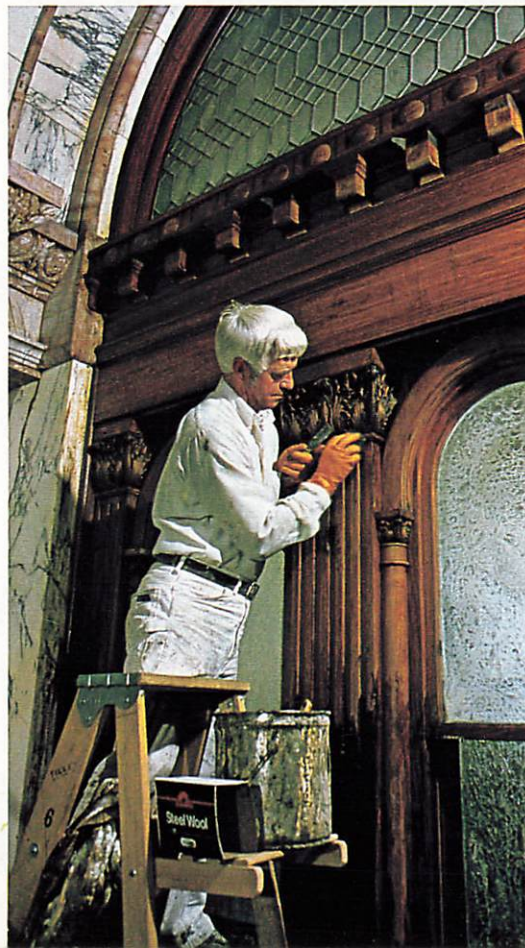




glass (**top**) of each of four dials, 15 feet in diameter, was replaced by a fiberglass screen with painted numerals to permit the sound of newly installed bells to ring across Washington. Boxed in glass, the refurbished clock mechanism can be viewed by visitors who ascend to the top of the 315-foot tower for a sweeping view of Washington.

Ornate brass letter box (**above**) in the 12th Street lobby recalls the building's original function. An area of the

Pennsylvania Avenue foyer will become a philatelic shop. There Albert Penn (**below**) strips off multilayered paint to reveal the glow of mahogany; woodwork, most of it red oak, has been revarnished. The 175 skilled craftsmen assembled for the renovation included marble polishers, finish carpenters, and ornamental plasterers like Norval Sipes (**below right**),



who cast this plaster-and-jute replacement for a damaged capital. The celery-like tendrils of another capital (**bottom**) needed no repair. Matching the original colors, painters cloaked the interior in pearl gray and creamy yellow. The eclectic ornaments and colors reflect the again-appreciated exuberance of the late Victorian age.

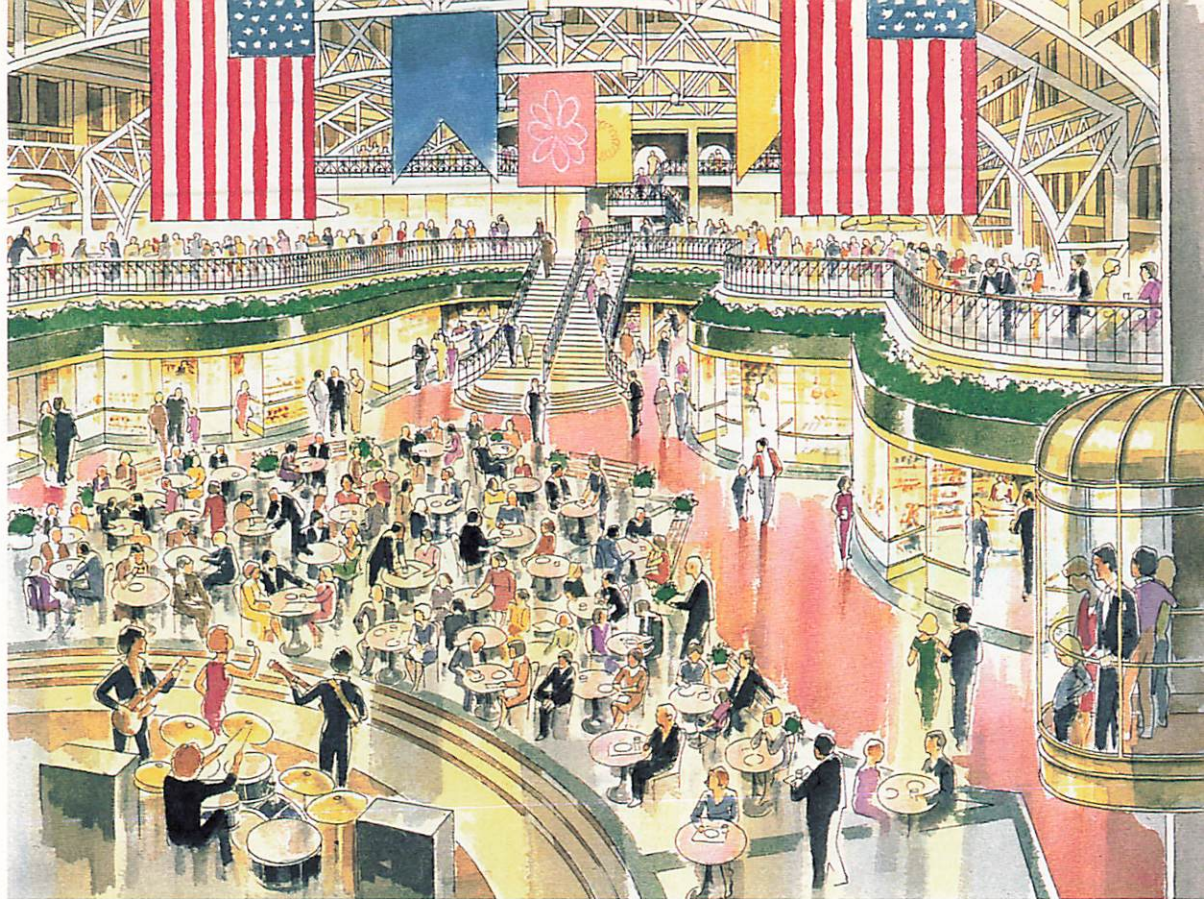
GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION (ABOVE)



(Continued from page 409) civilisation on its way." A bicentennial gift to Congress from the Ditchley Foundation of Great Britain, the bells duplicate those of Westminster Abbey. In fact, they were made in the same foundry, Whitechapel, that cast bells for the abbey four centuries ago (and later cast the Liberty Bell). For a closer look, or for a panoramic view of Washington, visitors will ascend to the tower entrance in a glass-walled elevator.

The recycled building will provide a "multisensory experience" and host a "festival market," according to Charles C. G. Evans, Jr., of the Evans Development Company of Baltimore, in charge of the commercial areas. Evans is planning morning-to-evening cultural programs in the cortile, with musicians, jugglers, dancers, and puppeteers. "We are treating the city to a nonstop party," declared architect Benjamin Thompson, who designed the food and shopping areas, as well as markets in three other cities, Boston's Faneuil Hall, Baltimore's Harborplace, and New York City's South Street Seaport, all testifying to the new vitality of the American city.

LIKE MOST federal buildings of its day, the Old Post Office was designed in the Treasury Department by the office of its supervising architect, Willoughby J. Edbrooke. The design was inspired by the Allegheny County Courthouse in Pittsburgh, one of the most renowned buildings to emanate from the drawing board of Henry Hobson Richardson. In the 1870s and into the



PAINTING BY NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC ARTIST WILLIAM H. BOND

New life, new sounds for downtown Washington

OPENING this fall, a complex called the Pavilion promises cafés, boutiques, and a stage; upstairs offices house agencies connected with the arts. Appropriately the building and adjoining plazas compose

the Nancy Hanks Center, honoring the late leader of the preservation drive. Visitors will ride the bubble elevator to the tower entrance, just below ten great bells, the only replicas ever cast of those in London's Westminster Abbey. Here Princess Alexandra and her husband, Angus Ogilvy (*below, center*), guests at the April dedication, inspect the peal, a bicentennial gift of Britain's Ditchley Foundation.

1880s, Richardson utilized the rough stonework, massive arches, and turrets inspired by 12th-century Romanesque architecture of southern France. Edbrooke also applied the style to federal buildings in St. Paul, Milwaukee, and Omaha.

Architectural tastes change, however, especially in Washington, where officials periodically attempt to bring grandeur to streets and structures. In the great triangle of Pennsylvania and Constitution Avenues and 15th Street, the Old Post Office had been the single federal edifice. A drive for classic order and more office space, headed by Secretary of the Treasury Andrew W. Mellon, resulted in an enclave of new buildings—the Federal Triangle—in the years after World War I.

The Old Tooth was to be extracted. Only the Depression, foreshortening the Mellon plan, saved it. But time was taking a toll. Its deterioration was dramatized in 1956 when a 1,200-pound clock weight crashed through two floors.

Other buildings along Pennsylvania Avenue also needed attention. Labor Secretary Arthur J. Goldberg reported to President John F. Kennedy in 1961 that the avenue's north side was "a blighted area that is unsightly by day and empty by night." Thus was born another commission charged with re-planning the avenue. Its proposals dealt in modern superblocks. Dissenting architecture would be replaced with updated versions of the Federal Triangle buildings constructed in the late 1920s and 1930s. Only the Old Post

Office's tower would be allowed to remain—standing in naked solitude.

Public anger began to rise. "The Old Post Office was there first!" I protested in my "Cityscape" column in the *Washington Post* in 1970. Not many years previously, the idea of preserving an obsolete building without historic significance had seemed vaguely un-American. But now civic activists were beginning to argue that the urban environment had valuable cultural attributes and, like wilderness, needed protection from destruction and pollution.

AN EARLY pioneer in the Save-the-Old-Post-Office drive was Alison Owings, then 26, a television producer: "Every time I returned to Washington from a trip, I found another piece of the city gone. I thought of the skill and caring and effort that craftsmen applied to laying a course of brick or carving woodwork. I got mad at the arrogance of bulldozing this devotion."

On April 19, 1971, she rallied two dozen protesters in front of the doomed Old Tooth. Their slogan, Don't Tear It Down, became the name of their organization. Officials were to hear that name many times, for the group attacked the Pennsylvania Avenue plan before zoning and planning agencies, the City Council, and congressional committees.

They hoped, as did I, not merely to salvage an old pile of granite but to adapt it to another use. The ground floor, we suggested, could be "Washington's Ghirardelli." Recently



completed, San Francisco's Ghirardelli Square had rekindled urban bustle around an old chocolate factory.

The new mood began to catch on; officials who had espoused the radical rebuilding of Pennsylvania Avenue began to back away. Still, the government's landlord, the General Services Administration (GSA), adamantly clutched the death warrant. GSA is, after all, in the business of providing efficient quarters for bureaucrats; it reckoned that an extension of the nearby Internal Revenue Service building would provide twice as much office space as remodeling the Old Tooth.

EENTER NANCY HANKS, a crafty politician and a girlishly unaffected, warm-hearted woman. "She cared deeply—she cared about little things," said Bill N. Lacy, who introduced her to the Old Post Office when he was director of architecture and environmental arts for the National Endowment for the Arts.

The place was a mess. The ground floor was carved up by partitions. Eighty years of grime had accumulated on the glass over the mail-sorting room. The skylight eight floors above that glass had been covered with metal sheathing. All the same, Miss Hanks was enamored.

"Nancy used all her charm, cunning, and power of persuasion to save the building," Mr. Lacy said. "I remember that our staff would meet with the GSA staff and get nowhere. Then Nancy arranged a breakfast meeting

with Arthur Sampson, the GSA administrator. She took him a single red rose."

Miss Hanks talked to congressmen. She ordered a feasibility study, hoping to show that the building could be remodeled cost-effectively. She had no authority to commission that study. So she went back to Mr. Sampson—with another rose, no doubt. He agreed that GSA would cosponsor it.

"Old buildings are like friends," Miss Hanks told a Senate subcommittee. They reassure people in times of change. The National Endowment, she hoped, would "encourage people to dream about their cities—to think before they build, to consider the alternatives before they tear down." No building, she thought, could give greater visibility to the Endowment's goals than the Old Post Office.

She hoped it could be used for both government offices and public enjoyment. But commercial activities were prohibited in federal buildings by law. Her office drafted the Public Buildings Cooperative Use Act, which, passed by Congress in 1976, made it possible to bring into this and other federal buildings the throb of the marketplace and the vitality of the stage. In memory of Miss Hanks, who died last January, Congress named the Old Post Office and its plazas the Nancy Hanks Center.

Washington architect Arthur Cotton Moore had long been active in the fight to save the building. A renovation design competition was won by a joint venture of McGaughy, Marshall, & McMillan, Arthur Cotton Moore

Associates, Associated Space Design, Inc., and Stewart Daniel Hoban Associates. Together they created the award-winning multi-tiered cortile area. When they replaced the metal roof with glass, they uncovered and enhanced what in my mind is one of the most cheerful interior spaces in all architecture.

The cortile area, named the Pavilion, was leased for 55 years to the Evans Company, which is investing nine million dollars of its own to create shops and other spaces. "It's a wonderful opportunity for both parties," Charles Evans said. "The taxpayer gets not only rent but also a share of the income from the commercial services. In other words, we shall be making money for the government."

But the greatest attraction is the setting, "the restored old building's beauty and magnificence," as Mr. Evans describes it. "No suburban shopping center can beat that."

The hum of the place is certain to attract Washingtonians as well as tourists from the great monuments on the Mall, just a short walk away. After office hours tourists have too few places to rest their feet in downtown Washington; when the workers go home, Pennsylvania Avenue still turns into a veritable necropolis.

Lighting up after dark, the Nancy Hanks Center will surely spark further activity. With the restoration of other buildings, Pennsylvania Avenue could again become a people magnet and the lively, cosmopolitan Main Street of the nation. □